

CIA/RR-CB-60-48

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CURRENT SUPPORT BRIEF

PROGRESS OF THE 1960 URBAN COMMUNES MOVEMENT IN COMMUNIST CHINA

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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SECRETNOFORN *deleted*PROGRESS OF THE 1960 URBAN COMMUNE MOVEMENT IN COMMUNIST CHINA*

An assessment of evidence accumulated since March 1960, when the movement to communalize city dwellers was revived in Communist China, suggests that the Chinese Communists have managed in 1960 to disrupt much of urban society without obtaining commensurate economic gains or advancing appreciably toward their long-term goal of building beautiful new garden cities. The Chinese, nevertheless, seem determined to keep on pushing the urban commune movement. Peiping's pretension that the urban commune is another step toward achieving the pure Communist way of life must have offended the ideological sensibilities of Moscow, which had just been coming around to a qualified acceptance of the Chinese rural commune as a useful agricultural organization for China.

The Chinese Communist leadership, driven more by ideological convictions than economic considerations, has declared that it is time for urbanites, like their country cousins in 1958, to begin taking their first steps toward attainment of pure communism through collectivizing household tasks and putting "emancipated" women to work outside the home. The July issue of China Reconstructs, a pictorial published in many languages for wide international distribution, contains one of the most forthright claims that the Chinese Communists have ever made for the sociably advanced character of the urban commune movement: 1/

"Universal for two years in the countryside, the people's communes, after an experimental period, are spreading rapidly to urban areas with their more complex problems... Here the communes...besides serving as a bridge to the future communist society are a means of transforming the towns inherited from the old exploiting order. Through them, China's new garden cities are growing with great speed."

Holding these views, Peiping has been pushing doggedly ahead with the urban communes in spite of their economic inefficiency and unpopularity. Out of the Chinese Communist urban population of 100,000,000, 20,000,000 reportedly were in communes after the first spurt in March 1960. 2/ By 20 May, there were 1,000 communes with 42,000,000 members, 3/ and, by the end of June, enrollment had increased to 52,000,000 in 1,027 communes. 4/ (Note that during June the average size of communes increased from 42,000 to 51,000 members.) Preparations possibly are being made to bring the population of most remaining urban areas of China under communes by 1 October--Communist China's National Day--in a final dramatic push. An indication of such a push is to be found in an interrogation report which states that housewives in Soochow, a large city near Shanghai, had been ordered to work this summer as apprentices without pay in some trade such as making matchboxes in preparation for the establishment of communes covering the entire city on 1 October 1960. 5/ Chinese Communist propaganda broadcasts in July, reporting that housewives in Shanghai are being taught vocational skills and that small-scale "community" industry is mushrooming there, suggest that the authorities may be softening up Shanghai for early communalization. With a population of 6,900,000 in 1958, Shanghai is China's largest city, as well as its most intransigent.

* This paper is a followup to CIA/RR CB-60-23, The Urban Commune, What Is it?, 18 April 1960.

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Although still pushing ahead, Peiping may be losing the edge of its enthusiasm. It has issued little publicity on the urban commune movement since July. When an editorial in the authoritative People's Daily reviewed the progress of various domestic policies on 18 August, all it could say for urban communes was that they were "developing at a steady pace." 6/ This editorial was on the front page and was printed in a large, special type reserved for important statements.

If the Chinese are having second thoughts about how far and how fast they should go, they may have been influenced by their failure to persuade other countries in the Communist Bloc that the new commune program has Marxist virtues. The Soviet ambassador, at any rate, is not likely to send home reports praising the urban commune in its initial form. 25X1X
 when urban communes were inspected in April 1960 by a group composed of chiefs of diplomatic missions, including the Soviet ambassador, the communes made a uniformly unfavorable impression even on the Bloc representatives in the group. 7/

Model urban communes have not been nearly so impressive as model rural communes. Whereas newsmen and diplomats taken to inspect rural showplaces often have been impressed with the seeming efficiency, enthusiasm, and prosperity observed, comments by such people on a variety of urban communes generally has been critical. They have reported that in urban communes shown to them, organization seems poor, officials confused, housewife-workers apathetic, and production of low value or useless. Even the Red Flag commune in Chengchow, one of the original urban communes and probably the most publicized in China, appalled a group of non-Communist trade representatives, including several Asians, who inspected it in May. 8/ (This commune was eulogized in the article from China Reconstructs quoted above).

Chinese authorities have been expanding the average size of urban communes by the simple administrative expedient of taking small communes formed of residents of a single street or of dependents of workers of one factory and calling them branch communes of a big commune which either encompasses an entire city in the case of small or medium cities or is based on the ch'u (ward) division of a large city. A few communes of several hundred thousand members have already been reported.

The authorities have not expanded the economic function of the urban commune beyond the limited scope allotted to the small communes set up in March 1960. Communes, no matter what their size, are still enjoined from interfering with activities of state-owned factories and large municipal utilities and are still primarily organizations of dependents of workers in state enterprises. The principal economic goal of the urban commune is still to collectivize household tasks and to put the housewife to work at whatever task can be found for her--weaving mats, sewing buttonholes, making noodles or brick, collecting and reusing scrap metal, and pulling carts. She may work either in her own home or in a commune "factory," usually a house that has been commandeered for community use. Most of her activities are probably more useful than some observers are willing to concede, but it is doubtful if the commune is the most efficient way of organizing these activities.

For the system to work the housewife must receive enough expense money at her job to pay for the extra services that she and her family require as commune members. These expenses are not small in relation

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to typical Chinese wages. Ten yuan* per person per month has been a standard messhall fee reported for several cities. A kindergarten in a Tsinan commune charges eight yuan a month to take care of one child. Another commune charges six yuan a month for laundry and other services provided by the service center. A set fee for medical insurance may be charged. [REDACTED] even housewives who received as much as 30 yuan a month--a wage that is considerably higher than the average for this type of work--can take home little of their pay after paying for commune services. 9/ The average wage probably is less than 20 yuan a month. Two recently arrived refugees in Hong Kong have reported wages for women in communes amounting to 12 yuan per month in one case and 0.50 yuan per day in the other. 10/

The economic fact of life on which the urban commune movement is stumbling is the difficulty that the regime has in finding paying jobs for women who must begin paying for the child care and cooking and laundry services now provided by the commune. There exists an economically legitimate demand for such services, and this demand has been expanding as a result of the rapid expansion in female employment in cities since 1957, but the Chinese Communists seem to be trying to impose these services on many people who do not need them. There are 25,000,000 adult women in Chinese cities, 8,000,000 of whom work for state enterprises (3,300,000 in 1957), and probably about 2,000,000 are gainfully employed in community industry (1957 figure unknown). It is not credible that useful employment can be quickly found for a large portion of the 60 percent of adult women in cities who at present do not work outside the home or who work only at welfare jobs for which they receive little or no remuneration. Unemployed women cannot easily be compelled to buy services which they are performing for themselves and for which they cannot readily pay. For these economic reasons the number of people eating all meals in community messhalls probably is far smaller than the number of commune members. An extreme example reported [REDACTED] was that of a commune visited in April 1960, which, with a total membership of 15,563, had only eight messhalls feeding 542 people. 11/

In this situation, although every city dweller may soon be nominally enrolled in a commune, it may mean little change for many households. It appears that neither employment of housewives nor the use of commune services will become universal in the near future, because employment opportunities do not exist and because those housewives who do not find paying jobs will not need (and cannot afford) commune services.

* A yuan equals: US 40.6¢ at the pound-sterling cross rate of exchange.

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30 September 1960

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12 September 1960

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